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ABSTRACT

Bibliotherapy can change children's attitudes toward reading and can help children solve the developmental problems they face. Research suggests that there is a significant correlation between self-concept and reading achievement. The middle school teacher must be aware of the correlation and use a variety of materials and techniques to develop good readers. (Fifteen references are attached.) (RS)

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Bibliotherapy and The Reluctant Student

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Abstract

Much has been written about the high illiteracy rate in our schools. It has been written that we teach children to read, but that they do not read. It is the purpose of this article to show that through the use of bibliotherapy that we can change the attitude of our youth toward reading. That if we present the reader with books that he/she can identify with that they will have an impact on the reader.

Bibliotherapy and The Reluctant Student

Bibliotherapy means different things to many different people. Cornett and Cornett (1980) define bibliotherapy as a basically simple idea: the use of books to help people. Shepherd and Iles (1976) define it as helping a pupil find a book that might help the pupil solve a personal problem, develop skills needed for living, and/or bolster self-image. Zintz and Maggart (1989) write that the term literally means therapy through books. All of these definitions assume that more than just reading for pleasure takes place as one reads a book. If children who are experiencing difficulties can read about others who have solved similar problems, they may see alternatives for themselves. By presenting possible solutions, books can help prevent some difficult situations from becoming full-blown problems. Through encountering frustrations and anxieties, hopes and disappointments,successes and failures in fictional situations, youngsters may gain insights applicable to situations they meet in real life (Deyer,1985).

Bibliotherapy is not a strange, esoteric activity but one that lies within the province of every teacher of literature working with every child in a group. It does not assume that the teacher must be a skilled therapist, nor the child a seriously maladjusted individual needing clinical treatment. Rather it conveys the idea that all teachers must be aware of the effect of reading on children, and must realize that through literature, most children can be helped to solve the developmental problems which they face (Jalongo,1983).

Bibliotherapy is not a solution to a deep-rooted psychological problem, although it can be used as one of many techniques used by a specialist. In terms of helping children who are experiencing problems, bibliotherapy treatment can occur by the child reading about others who have similar difficulties. The child learns about alternative solutions and gains new insights to his or her problem. Through books, children can also see how others have encountered anxieties and frustrations, hopes and disappointments, failures and successes, and apply this insight toward their own situations. Bibliotherapy can be used as an effective tool for helping children deal with various problems related to childhood (Pardeck and Pardeck, 1985).

Lindeman and King (1969) distinguish three types of bibliotherapy:

1. For emotionally disturbed children
2. For dealing with minor adjustment problems of children.
3. For dealing with basic developmental needs of children.

These levels of bibliotherapy suggest that it can be used for any number of problems which children may face, ranging from developmental needs to emotional problems.

In the process of using bibliotherapy, there must be more than a book and a reader. Russell and Shrodes emphasize that the "three personality mechanisms of identification, catharsis and insight, must be present in the dynamic interaction (Spache, 1972).

According to Cornett and Cornett (1980), in order for bibiliotherapy to achieve its goal, the reader must experience all three of the above stages. They go on to write that the reader must eventually achieve insight. This feeling may come from reading just one book, or it may take several bibliotherapeutic encounters to reach such insight.

Cornett and Cornett (1980) list the following skills that they feel that the biblioterapist should have:

1. Ability to determine the needs and interests of the individual.
2. Ability to provide books at the appropriate interest and difficulty levels.
3. Ability to evaluate books for the purpose they will serve in bibliotherapy.
4. Ability to ask a variety of appropriate questions to encourage the individual to verbalize.
5. Ability to use "seconds of silence" and patience to wait for responses after questions have been raised.
6. Ability to be a good listener and to communicate effectively.
7. Ability to weigh carefully the balance between interaction strategies and additional materials to help individuals reach the insight stage.
8. Ability to find additional sources of help when appropriate.

Children and Self-Concept:

Children are formulating their self-concept hundreds of times each day with every interaction they experience in their environment whether real or imaginary. The results of these interactions are woven into the web of their personality creating a positive or negative self-concept. A child's self-concept is often reflected in attitude toward achievement in school. What is described as laziness or lack of ability is many times the product of a poor self-image (Spiess,1976).

Ivan Quandt (1972) states that when students feel that they are regarded as incompetent by others who are important to them, they tend to counteract this perception some way. For most children this counteraction involves disguising incompetency or withdrawing effort from those areas in which they are regarded as incompetent. Quandt also states that children who come to school thinking they may not succeed or those who develop this feeling as a result of their school experience may become victims of their own belief. Disabled readers may, because of lack of self-confidence, become discouraged and stop or reduce efforts to improve.

Quality literature at all grade levels can be beneficial to students. Norris (1988) describes a young man, Mr. Kling, who teaches eighth graders on the west side of Chicago as saying that, "I knew these books would never reach these children, never make them excited enough to pick up a book and read it cover to cover," in describing his reading program. So he decided to stray from the curriculum and spice his reading list with books closer to the experience and culture of his students. His students are quoted as saying that they had never enjoyed reading,and had done no more than was forced upon them, until they became students of Mr. Kling. Now, they state, they love to read and would like for him to be their teacher the rest of their years in school.

Reading gives children greater insight into themselves. Everyone has a self-image or self-concept. The individual unconsciously builds his concept to reflect the love, kindness, and empathy or the lack of these things -- shown by his parents or other important people in his life (Schultheis,1970).

Do books have an impact on the reader? Do they reflect a reader in a measurable way over a period of time? Can books provide a vicarious medium for expressing one's own emotions? What Does The Research Say?

Several studies have been conducted concerning the reading of literature and its effect on the values that children and youth hold. Lewis (1968) produced research which tended to support the assumption that reading of literature affects values which children hold. In a study of sixth grade pupils, she measured the impact of selected literature upon values of aggressiveness, selfishness and nurturance and discovered that these values were influenced by reading.

Gentile and McMillan (1979) worked with a young Indian boy who was resistant to read anything. In an effort to motivate him to read he was ask to list the five most important things in his life. Since he listed other Indians first the authors began to supply him with books about Indians. Together they began to research specific questions that they had about Indians. The authors were amazed at the enthusiasm and effort exerted by the young man, not only during the period of reading research and conversation, but in writing as well.

Greenlaw (1981) writes that the impact of books over time can best be revealed by an ancedote concerning Milton Meltzer, well-known author of informational books. In a speech given in 1979 to a group of teachers and librarians, he stunned his audience by making an impassioned plea for care in the selection of books they used as instructional tools. He declared he had only recently come to terms with his own being. He had denied his Jewishness for over sixty years because, coming from a well read family, every "important" book he had read condemmed or denigrated Jews. Books had a devastating and long term impact on Meltzer's life.

Conclusion:

Research suggest that there is a significant correlation between self-concept and reading achievement. It is imperative that the middle-level school teacher be aware of such and use a variety of materials and techniques to develop good readers.

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